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IRENEUS AND THE GNOSTICS

RHETORIC AND COMPOSITION IN ADVERSUS HAERESES BOOK ONE

BY

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Ever since the discovery of the close parallels between Ireneus' account of the Barbelo Gnostics in *Adv.haer.* 1,29 and a Gnostic writing, the *Apocryphon of John*, debates have gone on over the reliability of Ireneus' treatment of his opponents' views.[1] Originally, Carl Schmidt suggested that Ireneus had merely excerpted the passage in *Adv.haer.* 1,29 from the longer *Apocryphon of John*.[2] But since the publication of the latter,[3] differences between the two accounts – notably in the reason given for Sophia's fall – have led scholars to abandon Schmidt's proposal. Four copies of the *Apocryphon of John*, two each of a long and short recension, survive. This very popular text could easily have circulated in yet another form, that used by Ireneus.[4]

Previous discussion had assumed that Ireneus was summarizing a

[1] The most recent attack on Ireneus' credibility has been launched by E.H.Pagels, Conflicting Versions of Valentinian Eschatology: Ireneus' Treatise vs. the Excerpts from Theodotus, *HTR* 67 (1974) 35–53. Pagels accuses Ireneus of deliberately distorting the Gnostic teaching that the psychics are saved at the final consummation and making it appear that only pneumatics are saved. P.'s treatment of Ireneus ignores the demands of the rhetorical genre in which he writes and his possible dependence upon sources like the *Apocryphon of John*, which do teach a threefold separation at the consummation. G.Quispel is surely correct when he suggests that we must distinguish a variety of theological opinions within Valentinianism, Origin and the Valentinian Gnosis, *VigChr* 28 (1974) 33–35.

[2] See C.Schmidt, Ireneus und seine Quelle in Adv.Haer.I,29, in: *Philotesia*, Festschrift P.Kleinert (Berlin 1909) 333f.

[3] The three versions from Nag-Hammadi have been published in M.Krause and P.Labib, *Die Drei Versionen des Apocryphon des Johannes im koptischen Museum zu Alt-Kairo*, ADAIK I (Wiesbaden, Otto Harrassowitz, 1962). A separate edition of the long version from codex II has been published by S.Giverson, *Apocryphon Johannis*, ATD V (Copenhagen, Munksgaard, 1963). For the Berlin codex see W.Till, *Die gnostischen Schriften des koptischen Papyrus Berolinensis 8502*, TU 60 (Berlin, Akademie-Verlag, 1955).

[4] See W.Foerster, Das Apocryphon des Johannes, in: *Gott und die Götter*, Festschrift E.Fascher (Berlin 1958) 131 n.9; H.-M.Schenke, Nag-Hamadi Studien I: Das literarische Problem des Apocryphon Johannis, *ZRGG* 14 (1962) 58; J.Doresse, *The*

Gnostic source in *Adv. haer.* 1,29. Recently Frederick Wisse has challenged that position. Wisse has proposed that Ireneus copied this information from an earlier heresiologist.[5] While parts of Book One certainly are from such a work, study of genre and composition in *Adv. haer.* I suggests that this passage and several others, which Wisse had assigned to that source, do not in fact belong to it.

Briefly, Wisse assigns all material to the source, which he supposes that Ireneus would not have encountered among the Valentinians and Marcosians. Ireneus says that, in addition to his personal contacts with them, he has read commentaries by these groups (*Adv. haer.* I, *praef.*; Harvey I, 1–7). Therefore, Wisse holds that Ireneus is directly responsible for the discussion of Ptolemy's system (*Adv. haer.* 1,1–8; Harvey I, 8–80); the account of the Marcosians (*Adv. haer.* 1,13–21; Harvey I, 114–188) and two transitional explanations (*Adv. haer.* 1,9–10; Harvey I, 80–97; *Adv. haer.* 1,31,3–4; Harvey I, 243f.).[6] The rest derives from an earlier heresiologist, who has set the pattern for the patristic picture of the Gnostics as pathological system builders, split into numerous sects with clearly defined geneologies.[7] Wisse is certainly correct to point out that the picture of the Gnostics which we derive from the Nag-Hammadi material does not fit the catalogues of such heresiologists.

But some simple considerations of literary genre and style raise problems for this source analysis. Oral and rhetorical models influenced ancient writing to a far greater extent than is often realized.[8] Ireneus' rhetorical training has been amply demonstrated by William Schoedel[9]

Secret Books of the Egyptian Gnostics, trans. P. Mairet (London, Hollis & Carter, 1960) 210f.; R. Kasser, Bibliothèque gnostique I: Le Livre secret de Jean, *RThPh* 97 (1964) 145, and *idem*, Le Livre secret de Jean dans ses differents formes textuelles coptes, *Muséon* 77 (1964) 16; M. Krause, The Relation of the Apocryphon of John to the account in Ireneus, in: W. Foerster, *Gnosis, Vol. I: Patristic Evidence*, trans. R. Wilson (Oxford, Clarendon Press 1972) 103. The developments which led to the different versions probably took place before the translation of the work into Coptic, so R. Kasser, Bibliothèque gnostique I, 142f.

[5] F. Wisse, The Nag-Hammadi Library and the Heresiologists, *VigChr* 25 (1971) 215.

[6] *Ibid.*, 212–215.

[7] So Wisse, *op. cit.*, 218.

[8] On the nature of oral culture and the influence of rhetorical forms on literature see the informative work of Walter Ong, *The Presence of the Word* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1967).

[9] W. R. Schoedel, Philosophy and Rhetoric in the Adversus Haereses of Ireneus, *VigChr* 13 (1959) 22–32. S. proposes that the following divisions determine the structure of *Adv. haer.*: (1) exordium, i Praef. 1–3; (2) narratio, all of book One; (3) confirmatio, books II–V.

and Robert Grant,[10] though neither has undertaken a detailed analysis of Book One. Ireneus, himself, points to such a context for understanding his work, when he apologizes for his dialect and lack of rhetorical practice – both rhetorical commonplaces.[11] The rhetorical handbooks suggest what Ireneus is about. There the student is taught to apply the methods of refutation, *anaskeuē*, and confirmation, *kataskeuē*, to myths, narratives, sayings and laws.[12] Such a refutation is to criticize an account for obscurity, improbability, impossibility, inconsistency, unsuitability, omitting necessary information, including unnecessary information, disagreeing with commonly held views, and prejudice on the part of the author. In the case of myths, their moral teaching may be attacked.[13] Rival philosophical schools opposed their own consistent doctrine and unified approach to the mass of errors and contradictions put forth by their opponents. Such attacks launch all manner of contradictions, objections and insults against the opponents – a veritable, verbal *Blitzkrieg*.[14] Since arguments for the defense appealed to the authority of the author and, in the case of myths, to allegorical interpretation,[15] an opponent would attack the author's authority and insist upon literal interpretation of the contradictions in the myth.

Ireneus' refutation of the Gnostics encompasses all of these points. The morality of the Gnostic myth is attacked by describing the immoral behavior of those who hold it: they associate with idolators; attend gladiator shows, and are sexually promiscuous (*Adv. haer.* 1,6,3f.; Harvey I,55f.). Ireneus devotes much effort to showing the absurdity of his

[10] R.M.Grant, Ireneus and Hellenistic Culture, *HTR* 42 (1949) 41–51. Also see the detailed analysis of the rhetorical structure of Tertullian's anti-heretical treatises by R.D.Sider, *Ancient Rhetoric and the Art of Tertullian* (Oxford University Press, 1971).

[11] See H.I.Marrow, *A History of Education in Antiquity*, trans. G.Lamb (New York, New American Library, 1964) 275 on the concern for dialect, i.e. Attic (cf. also Lucian, *Rh. Pr.* 16; 20) and *ibid.*, 279f. on the mania of Hellenistic man for practicing his rhetoric. On the commonplace "ability to speak", see Schoedel, Phil. and Rhet., 27. S. gives to following examples: Plat. *Apol.* 17b; Lysias 19,1.2; Isaeus 10,1; Hermogenes, *Peri Ideou* 2,6 (Spengel II,370).

[12] See the sketch of this topic in R.M.Grant, *Earliest Lives of Jesus* (New York, Harper & Row, 1961) 38–49.

[13] The exact content of such lists varies, but the general topics remain the same. See Grant, *Earliest Lives*, 40 and the discussions of the second century rhetors Theon, L.Spengel, *Rhetores Graeci* II (Leipzig 1856) 57–130 and Hermogenes, *ibid.*, 9,4–7.

[14] See D.L.Dungan, Reactionary Trends in the Gospel-Producing Activity of the early Church, in: *The Genre of the Gospels*, (Missoula, Society of Biblical Literature, 1972) 88.

[15] On *kataskeuē* see Aphthonius, *Rhet. Gr.* II,28–30.

opponents' treatment of Scripture (*Adv.haer.* 1,9f. and most of Book Two). Chapters Nine through Twelve attack the unity of the Gnostics. Their opinions are inconsistent (*Adv.haer.* 1,11; Harvey I,98–108, and 2,1–13; Harvey I,251–86), and they dispute among themselves (*Adv.haer.* 1,12; Harvey I,109–114). Indeed, they seem to be inspired by a multitude of evil spirits (*Adv.haer.* 1,9,5; Harvey I,89). Their disunity is contrasted with the world-wide unity of the catholic church (*Adv.haer.* 1,10; Harvey I, 90–97). Ireneus' famous metaphor of the Gnostic scriptural interpretation as similar to breaking up a beautiful mosaic of a king to make one of a fox or a dog (*Adv.haer.* 1,8,1; Harvey I,67f.) is alluded to in the preface's comparison of the Gnostics to those who pass off glass beads for jewels. It returns as an *inclusio* at the beginning of the conclusion to the book when Ireneus says that his work makes clear the "ill-conditioned carcase of this miserable, little fox" (*Adv.haer.* 1,31,4; Harvey I,243).[16] Ireneus' use of such images also has roots in rhetorical traditions which instructed the student to use vivid, peculiar, and striking images as a means of fixing the points of his argument in the memory.[17]

Another indication that Ireneus' procedure has been dictated by rhetorical models is his use of examples from Homer. Not only was Homer the school book of antiquity,[18] but the text of Homer also seems to have been used for rhetorical exercises in refutation and confirmation. Dio Chrysostom's *Troica* is an elaborate example of an exercise in refutation.[19] Ireneus uses faulty Homer exegesis as an illustration of the absurdities of Gnostic practice (*Adv.haer.* 1,9,4; Harvey I,86–88).[20] He returns to Homer in chapter Twelve and compares the absurdities of the Homeric deities – a commonplace? – with the Gnostic heavenly entities.

But the gems of Ireneus' rhetorical art are his parodies of Gnostic systems. In *Adv.haer.* 1,4,3f. (Harvey I,37f.), he "assists" the Gnostics in accounting for the origins of various types of water: salt water from Achamoth's tears; fresh water from her perspiration etc. (Ireneus must

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[16] The note to this passage in *Ante Nicene Fathers* I,358, which identifies it as an allusion to Cant.2,15 and Lk.13,32, has missed the rhetorical allusion.

[17] The discussion of the use of such images in classical rhetorical theory is treated in F.Yates, *The Art of Memory* (Hammondsworth, Penguin Books, 1969) 17–41.

[18] On the use of Homer in education, see Marrou, *History*,226–35.

[19] See the discussions of this oration in W.Kroll, *Rheinisches Museum* 70 (1915) 607–10, and R.M.Grant, *Earliest Lives*, 44f.

[20] On the teaching of Homeric exegesis at the secondary school level, see Marrou, *History*, 231–35.

have been found of this piece of ingenuity. He repeats it in *Adv.haer.* 2,10,2; Harvey I,274.) Then in chapter Eleven, he turns his wit to the generation of the upper world and suggests a collection of Valentinian melons derived from the primal beings Gourd and Utter-emptiness (*Adv.haer.* 1,11,4; Harvey I,105f.). These brief observations are sufficient to show that Ireneus has conceived his work along well-known rhetorical lines. Such models dictate both the form and content of many of his assertions, which must, therefore, be understood as meeting rhetorical expectations and not as factual reports.

Ireneus has a further rhetorical obligation: to attack the authority to which the Gnostics appeal. Hans von Campenhausen has suggested that they had taken over the concepts of *paradosis* and *diadochē* from the philosophical schools to justify their tradition.[21] Ireneus counters with an elaborate geneology of Gnostic sects (*Adv.haer.* 1,23–28; Harvey I, 190–221) designed to show that the Gnostics cannot trace their traditions to the apostles but must admit descent from the enemy of the apostles, Simon Magus. It has been suggested that Ireneus turned to an earlier heresiological work – possibly an updated version of Justin's *Syntagma* – for this section of *Adversus haereses.*[22] Ireneus, himself, distinguishes the carefully laid out geneology of the Simonian sects from the Valentinian hydra which he must confront (*Adv.haer.* 1,30,15; Harvey I,241; II, *praef.*; Harvey I,248f.) and thus suggests that he has taken over a geneology of heresies which did not include his own opponents. Therefore, Wisse's inclusion of material on the Valentinians in Ireneus' source seems highly unlikely. Further, there are rhetorical grounds for assigning these chapters (*Adv.haer.* 1,11 and 12; Harvey I, 98–113) to Ireneus' own work: (1) they provide the necessary exposition of contradictions and disunity among the opponents; (2) chapter Twelve contains the second Homeric allusion – probably a rhetorical commonplace in a *refutatio*; (3) the second parody occurs in chapter Eleven and is typically Ireneus.

Nor can chapters Twenty-nine and Thirty be shown to belong to the source. Here comparison of style and method of treating heresies between material which is certainly Ireneus and material definitely from the source proves decisive. Wisse, himself, points to one such discrepency: the source begins each account with the name and/or descent from a Gnostic

[21] H. von Campenhausen, *Ecclesiastical Authority and Spiritual Power*, trans. J.A.Baker (Stanford University Press, 1969) 158f.

[22] See the discussion in Wisse, N-H Library,213–15.

teacher. *Adv.haer.* 1,29 and 30 do not.[23] This geneological classification beginning with the name of the Gnostic teacher may have begun with Justin's *Syntagma*, since it is characteristic of his procedure in *Apol.* 1,26 where he refers the reader to his *Syntagma* for more information. Materials in *Adv.haer.* 1,23–28, which would have been added to Justin's work are constructed according to that pattern. No attempt has been made to fit *Adv.haer.* 1,29 and 30 into the scheme, however.

Further, the style of refutation in the source differs from that employed by Ireneus. The catalogue in chapters Twenty-three to Twenty-eight treats all Gnostic heresies according to a set pattern. Unlike Ireneus, its author does not summarize Gnostic sources as the much discussed divergence between his account of Basilides and the more authentic version in Hippolytus (*Ref.* 7,20–27) shows.[24] The basic pattern used in the source may also have derived from Justin. Its major features occur in his brief discussion of the heretics Simon, Menander and Marcion in *Apol.* 1,26. The aim of the source – dictated by the rhetorical demands of composing such a *syntagma*? – seems to have been to show: (1) all heresies are ultimately derived from Simon Magus; (2) all the heretics teach the *same* collection of falsehoods. Note that this aim differs from the prescriptions which govern Ireneus' composition. If we were to use this material to compose a manuel for the budding heresiologist, we would instruct him to include the following points in his description of every Gnostic heresy:[25]

(1) Its rejection of the God of the Old Testament.

(2) Its supposition that evil angels or an inferior power created the world.

(3) Its false teaching about Jesus – especially docetic Christology.

(4) The magical practices of its adherents.

(5) The idolatry and other forms of immorality practiced by its adherents.

(6) The claim made by its adherents that they have been liberated from obedience to the evil angels and/or the creator.

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[23] *Idem*, 215.

[24] On the originality of the account in Hippolytus, see J.H. Waszink, art. Basilides, *RAC* I, 1217–25. The peculiarity of the version in Ireneus is probably due to the pattern in which his source casts all heresies.

[25] Such formalized patterns are common in rhetorical literature. The student learned lists of points to be treated in speeches on different topics. See Marrou, *History*, 270–74.

The material in *Adv.haer.* 1,29 and 30 does not fit the heresiological mould of the source. But it fits very well with the style of detailed summary that Ireneus uses in describing his Valentinian and Marcosian opponents earlier in the book. Wisse's major objection to assigning these chapters to Ireneus seems to be that Ireneus had no other sources of Gnostic teaching available to him than those obtained from his opponents. Probably so. But, since stylistic and structural criteria make it unlikely that *Adv.haer.* 1,29 and 30 came from the earlier heresiologist, we can as well assume that the Gnostic sources used for these chapters were current among the Valentinians. We know that the Gnostics preserved and used many diverse materials. In his discussion of Valentinian doctrines in chapter Eleven,[26] Ireneus mentions the fact that the doctrines he is discussing there are similar to those of other Gnostics whom he will describe later – in chapter Thirty, as it turns out. Since Ireneus, others have also found parallels between the *Apocryphon of John* and the Valentinian speculations.[27] Yvonne Janssens observes that the type of exegesis found in the *Apocryphon of John* after the section with a parallel in *Adv.haer.* 1,29 is much like that for which Ireneus castigates the Valentinians in chapter Eight.[28] She also suggests that the *Apocryphon of John*'s description of Sophia's offspring as an abortion is parallel to the *ektroma* mentioned in the Valentinian myths.[29] We might also suggest that the Valentinian account of the fall of Sophia (*Adv.haer.* 1,2,2; Harvey I, 14f.) could be a reinterpretation of what we find in *Adv.haer.* 1,29. The Valentinian fall has two motifs: (1) the separation of Sophia from the embrace of her consort; (2) her restless search for the Father whom she stretches forth to reach. The myth in *Adv.haer.* 1,29 says that she was engaged in a restless search for a consort which leads her to extend herself into the lower regions. The Valentinian account could well be a platonizing, mystical reinterpretation of this mythologoumenon

[26] If the material in C.G. XI,2 (24,1–41,3) parallels that in *Adv.haer.* 1,11 as Wisse claims, *op.cit.*, 217, then this material was probably also circulating among the Valentinians. Photos of this treatise have been published in *The Facsimile Edition of the Nag-Hammadi Codices: Codices XI, XII & XIII* (Leiden, E.J.Brill, 1973) 30–47.

[27] R.Kasser, Bibliothèque gnostique I,141, suggests that the *Apocryphon of John* was as fundamental to Gnostics as the Bible to Christians. On the *Apocryphon of John* as a possible source of Valentinian speculation, see F.Sagnard, *La Gnose Valentinienne et la Témoinage de St.Irenée* (Paris 1947) 445f. and H.Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion*, rev.ed. (Boston, Beacon Press, 1963), 199.

[28] See Y.Janssens, L'Apocryphon de Jean, *Muséon* 84 (1971) 406.

[29] *Ibid.*, 64; 409.

along the lines of Alexandrian gnosis[30] and in such a way as to bring it into line with the Valentinian conception of the goal of gnosis as union with the heavenly syzygy (*Adv. haer.* 1,7,1; Harvey I, 59).

Thus, we may suggest that among his Gnostic commentaries Ireneus found at least two works which the Valentinians read as sources of their own systems. He is a good enough student of Gnosticism to realize that they are not strictly speaking Valentinian. They also serve his purposes admirably, since they allow him to provide ancestors for the Valentinians. Having no name for these people, Ireneus simply refers to them as "Gnostics" (*Adv. haer.* 1,11,1; Harvey I, 98; 1,29,1; Harvey I, 221). If the source Ireneus used in chapter Twenty-nine is indeed a non-Christian, Gnostic work similar to one used by the author of the *Apocryphon of John*, then, we may see these mythologoumena as reinterpreted in two Christian Gnostic contexts: that represented by the several versions of the *Apocryphon of John* and – with considerably more elaboration and transposition – that represented by the followers of Ptolemeus whose poor, little fox Ireneus has so meticulously dissected.

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[30] See Plotinus' objections to the Gnostics in *Enn.* 2,9. J. M. Robinson has suggested that C. G. VII, 5 (118,10–127,27) represents the type of Gnosis against which Plotinus argues. For the plates of this work, see *The Facsimile Edition: Codex VII* (1972) 118–127.